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ABSTRACT

This document presents the fifth of five newsletters on sex education for parents. The newsletters were designed to help parents increase their ability to communicate with their adolescents about sexual issues. They explore the origins of the parents' feelings about sex; teach the importance of a healthy self-concept and how to build it in the adolescent; unravel the physical, social, and emotional mysteries of adolescence; and develop some skills that will help parents talk about sex with their adolescents. The specific goals of this newsletter on talking about sex are to help parents: (1) be able to identify some reasons why parents might not discuss sex with their children; (2) understand their role in the sex education of their adolescent; (3) understand what adolescents want to know about sex; and (4) know some techniques for communicating with adolescents about sexuality. The newsletter is presented in workbook format with spaces provided for parents to write answers to questions and exercises. It concludes with a reference list and a short list of suggested readings for parents. (NB)

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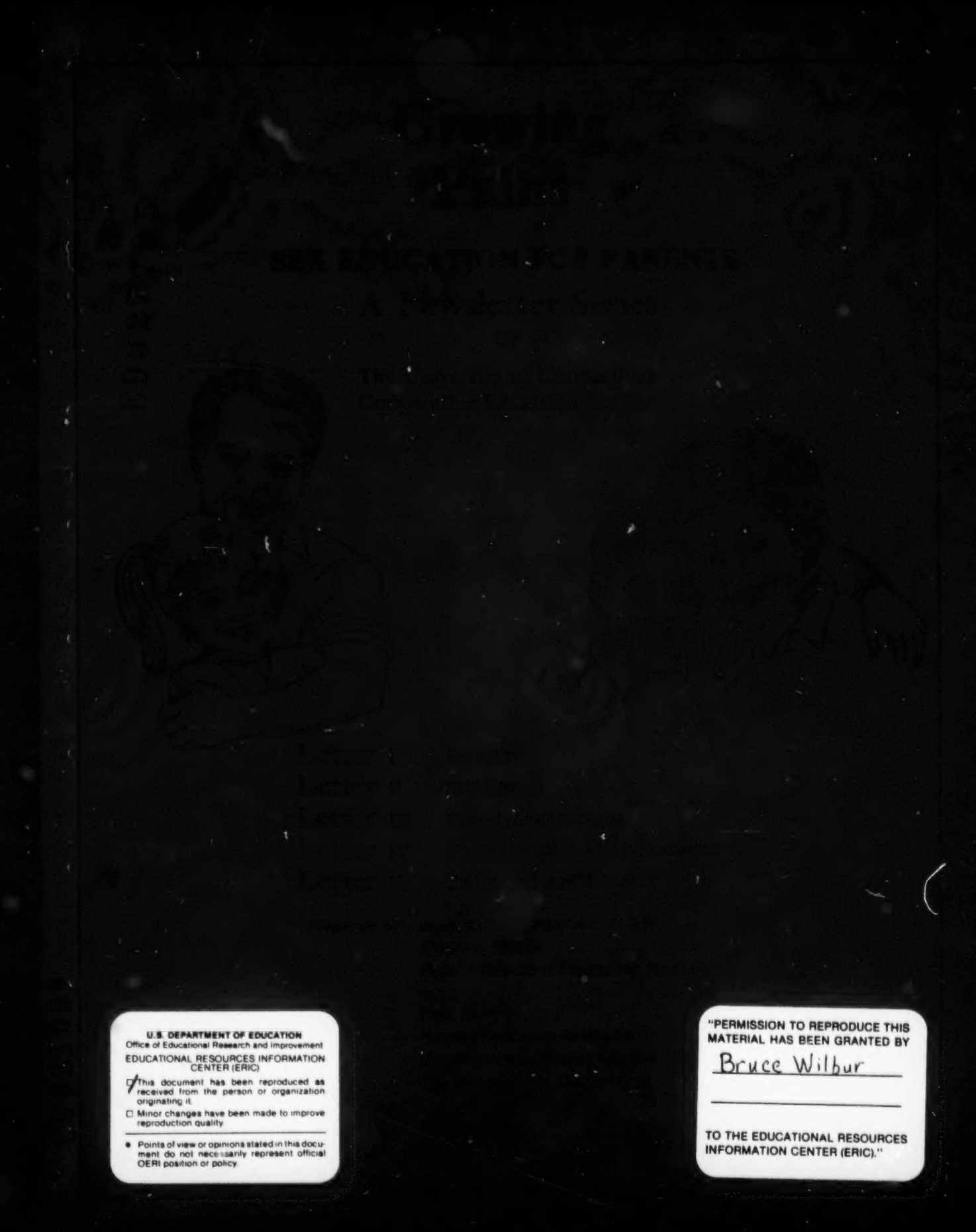

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Letter V
Talking About Sex

At the end of this letter you should:

- be able to identify some reasons why parents might not discuss sex with their children.
- understand your role in the sex education of your adolescent.
- understand what adolescents want to know about sex.
- know some techniques for communicating with adolescents about sexuality.

Initial work on this project was conducted by Joan Polulech, M.S.W., in 1983 as part of a Pregnancy Prevention Program which was Funded by the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs, DHHS.

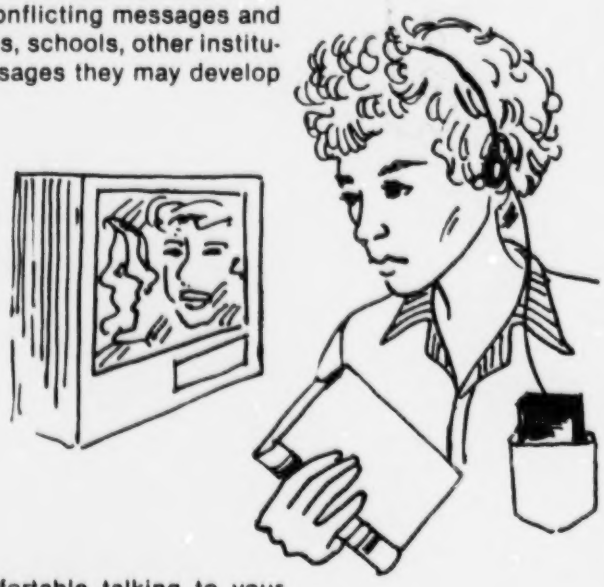
SEX EDUCATION — WHO PROVIDES IT?

The home is probably the best place for sex education. According to most studies with both adolescents and adults, however, parents are not the primary source of information about sex. According to Gallup polls, the primary sources of information (or misinformation) are:

SOURCE	PERCENT	
Peers	37	
Media	22	
Mother	17	(conception and menstruation)
School	15	(VD mostly)
Clergy	.5	
Doctors	.3	
Fathers	—	(tend to see sex education as mother's responsibility)

DOES IT MATTER WHO PROVIDES SEX EDUCATION?

Adolescents are bombarded with negative values about sex and social relationships by enticing and suggestive images on TV, in films, and explicit sexual messages in rock music. Given these sources of information (and much of it is misinformation), it is not surprising that many adolescents make social and sexual decisions without well-considered values or accurate information. These decisions may affect them for years or for the rest of their lives. They must struggle to make sense of the conflicting messages and information from their friends, radio, TV, magazines, schools, other institutions and their families. As a result of these messages they may develop unhealthy attitudes towards sex.



You may, like many other parents, feel uncomfortable talking to your adolescent about sexual topics. Most parents and their adolescents have difficulty discussing both factual information and personal values about sexuality. Both parents and children may want to talk more, but few are able to translate this wish into action. **For example, 40% of early puberty-age girls have never discussed menstruation with either parent. Nearly all fathers (approximately 96%) avoid discussing any aspect of sexuality with their children. Yet both parents and children tell researchers that they believe parents should be responsible for their children's education about sex, and that they desire more open communication.**

PARENTS AND SEX EDUCATION

Why don't parents take a more active role in educating their adolescents about sex? There are at least two parental beliefs that may stop them.

One is: **If we teach kids about sex at home or in school they will become sexually active.**

The question isn't whether or not young people should receive sex education, but whether that education should be planned or unplanned. Actually, sex education takes place with or without your permission. Learning is continuous from birth to death.

Only 10% of young people in this country get comprehensive sex education in school and the majority of parents feel uncomfortable talking about sex. Yet, 50% of the girls and 70% of the boys in the U.S. have had sexual intercourse before completion of high school. **They are not waiting for our permission.** Sex education can help delay sexual activity by opening up communication between young people and adults. This is a major goal of most sex education programs.

The second belief is: **Adolescents do not have to be told about sex, they know about it already.**

Ironically, there is a high level of ignorance among adolescents who are the most sexually active. Just as we would hope that anyone driving a car, shooting a gun, or teaching a class would be adequately prepared to handle that activity, so we hope that adolescents would have knowledge and skills needed to make responsible decisions about when to become sexually active.

But, HOPE is not a method. Current research indicates that two-thirds of adolescents seeking birth control at family planning clinics have been sexually active for at least nine months before coming in for information.

HAVE YOU TALKED TO YOUR ADOLESCENT ABOUT SEX?

In the chart below check how much you have already discussed the different subjects with your adolescent:

	Never	Somewhat	Enough
Expected body changes during puberty			
Menstruation			
Wet dreams			
Homosexuality			
Pre-marital sex			
Peer pressure to be sexually active			
Sex roles — what does it mean to be male/female			
Conception/reproduction			
Anatomy			
Masturbation			
Birth Control			
Your values/beliefs about the above			

If you have not discussed the above topics with your adolescent to the degree that you would like, decide when specifically you will discuss three of the topics with them.

Topic to be discussed	By When

In the areas where you answered "enough" what made this topic discussible while others were not?

In those areas where you answered "never" or "somewhat" what stopped you from discussing the topic?

(If your reasons for not discussing the subjects above included embarrassment, lack of knowledge, not sure how you feel yourself, didn't know how to discuss the subject, or if you were put off by your adolescents saying, "Oh Mom I know all that already") — **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

PREPARING FOR THE DISCUSSION

You should know now why you haven't been able to talk to your adolescent as much as you would like to. What can you do now to change that? We have seven suggestions on how to get started again.

1. Accept the fact that adolescents **are** interested in sex and sexuality. Not talking to them only increases their anxiety and misconceptions.
2. You may be afraid because you do not feel comfortable talking about sex. You may be embarrassed, you may stutter, or even get upset or angry when your adolescent talks about certain things. This will affect the way you respond. If you feel uncomfortable talking about sex, practice by talking to your spouse, partner or friend before you talk to your adolescents.
3. Be sure you know the facts. Information about body changes, masturbation, peer pressure, venereal disease (including AIDS), birth control and other related topics is available in current books written for parents and their adolescents.
4. Use the "listening" skills discussed in the previous lesson. Adolescents need to feel that their ideas or concerns about sex are **worth listening to.** Many times adolescents have trouble saying exactly what they mean, especially when it comes to sex. Remember that your adolescents may be afraid to talk about certain things. You may even wonder whether they are doing what they are talking about. Use "reflective listening" to be sure that you understand what your adolescent is saying or asking. Use "feeling messages" to put your feelings and thoughts across. This will help you control your feelings, but it will not be easy.
5. Eliminate as many of the roadblocks to good communication as possible (letter IV). When we judge, jump to conclusions, or criticize we cut-off communication. Parents sometimes lose the chance to help young people think and talk about sex, because they nag, preach, or moralize. The young person needs to know that talking about sex is a two-way communication, not a disciplinary session.

6. Encourage your adolescents to express their feelings and thoughts freely. They may express values or opinions about sex that are different from yours. Remember, these may not be firmly held ideas or values (letter I). This is part of the sorting process our young people go through. So listen to what they have to say. If you agree with what they have to say, say so. If you disagree, then clearly state your own view-point, and why you feel that way. You can do this at a later date when it does not seem like an attack on your adolescents or their views, or right at the moment if it seems appropriate. However, let the adolescent know that you will discuss it again — that he or she can freely express that same opinion again.
7. Avoid over or under-answering questions. Answer questions directly. Answer the question that is asked. A simple question needs a simple answer. On the other hand, if the question deals mostly with values and opinions, you may want to take some time to tell how you formed your opinion, or where your values about the subject came from. If you don't know the answer to a question, offer to find out or look it up together. **If your adolescent asks a question, say about sexual intercourse, it doesn't mean that he/she is doing it.** Accusing them will only cut off communication.

WHEN SHOULD YOU BEGIN TALKING TO YOUR ADOLESCENT ABOUT SEXUALITY?

You already have with day to day messages. All parents unconsciously transmit attitudes and values to their adolescents from birth on. Recent data indicates some adolescents begin sexual activity at a very early age. (In 1984 more than 11,000 teens under the age of 15 became parents and 15,000 had abortions.) Females are menstruating earlier than previous generations and marrying later. Thus, children and adolescents must deal with their sexuality at an earlier age and for longer periods of time. Outside of the home there are many sources of distorted views of sexuality and misinformation to fill the gap left if you do not become the primary sex educator. Therefore, the answer to the question "when" is **the sooner, the better!** The way you present information should be determined by the adolescent's ability to understand it.

HOW MUCH SHOULD YOU TELL YOUR ADOLESCENT ABOUT SEX?

You may be afraid that you will tell your adolescent too much. It's important for you to recognize that fear and determine what you are afraid might happen and whether that is realistic. Your fears may be based on your own uncomfortableness with a topic that wasn't discussed much when you were growing up. Young people generally filter out what they aren't ready to hear. Many sex educators say that it is a good rule of thumb to tell your children a little more than what you think they will understand.

Are there certain things an adolescent should be told that you would not tell a younger child? Every child in your family is at a different interest level. Boys and girls at younger ages in particular are not the same emotionally, physically, and socially. Your 12-year-old daughter might be interested in and understand some things that your 13 year old son would not. You, as a parent, know your children better than anyone else. William Block, who has worked with parents and young people as a sex educator, describes three stages of sexuality:

The Dormant Age (5 to 9 years) — This is a joyful, happy period of life. Children from 5 to 9 are free to play, make friends, cuddle pets, and just be themselves. Questions that might be asked during this period include:

"Why do fish lay eggs?"
"Where do puppies grow before they're born?"
"Why does my teenage sister lock her bedroom door?"
"Why am I a boy (or a girl)?"

Answers should be simple, direct and to the point.

The awakened Age (10 to 14 years) — This is the time in children's lives when they become aware of themselves and others. Children at this age have a heightened curiosity about their bodies and physical changes that are occurring within them. Common questions include:

"How does a baby breathe in a mother's stomach?"
"How can I get rid of pimples?"
"Does a woman have to get married to have babies?"

Answers should be given with absolute, direct honesty. The more complete and honest you are at this time, the more respect, love, and adherence to your guidelines of morality you will get in return.

The Active Period of Sexuality (15 to 19 Years) — Children at this age are rapidly nearing adulthood. If their questions about sexuality have not been answered adequately before this period, the discussion becomes more difficult at this point. Common questions include:

"Why can't I go steady?"
"I don't like girls. Is this okay?"
"How can a person get an abortion?"

Answers should be brief, honest and as unemotional as possible. Teenagers from 15 to 19 are impatient and are looking for brief, relevant answers. They are more likely to respond when you answer their questions and discuss the topic with them rather than preach to them about what is right or wrong.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS TEACH?

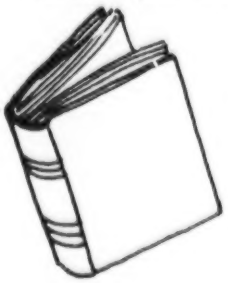
One of the reasons why adolescents engage in sexual relations is pleasure. However, some adolescents confuse sexual involvement with love. Thus adolescents engage in sexual activities when they are actually searching for a relationship that will provide them with trust, attention, acceptance and love. Sexual involvement may provide that temporary feeling of giving and receiving. But a sexual experience cannot provide what it is not capable of providing. Therefore, parents should realize the importance of teaching their children not only about sexuality, but also about love and relationships. While they are compatible, sex and love are not the same thing. One of the most important things you can teach your children is, "How to tell when you are in love..." Adolescents can love as deeply and as strongly as anyone. When you make fun of their feelings by calling it puppy love or infatuation you miss out on sharing one of the most important events in their lives. Do you remember your first love?

IF YOUR ADOLESCENT DOES NOT ASK QUESTIONS

Some adolescents don't ask questions about sex. Does that mean that they don't have any questions? They may have a vague feeling that they need to know something. They may have even sensed that their parents are uncomfortable or would be embarrassed talking about sex. Even if your adolescents aren't asking questions, they may want to discuss the subject with you. What can we do to start the discussions?

TALKING ABOUT SEX

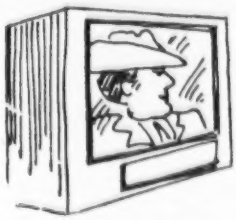
You might be happy to know that while some parents are blessed with an adolescent that was "born" knowing how to respond to their parents' communication skills, many adolescents seem to have "terminal lock jaw." Don't despair, here are some suggestions to unlock the jaws:



1. Buy a book on sexuality geared to your adolescents. Leave it in the bathroom!
2. Bring up a topic at the dinner table such as, "I read in the paper today that there were 11,000 live births to children 15 years and under last year." If they ask what "Live" means you can say, "a pregnancy that ended in a baby being born rather than ending in an abortion or miscarriage." And guess what? You have the beginnings of sex education on such topics as birth control, decision-making, responsibility, abortion and what it must be like being pregnant at 15.

If this is the first time you have tried to start a conversation about sex or sexuality they might wait to see what you are up to. Listen if they express their thoughts and feelings on the subject. Don't fall into the trap of giving a lecture on the evils of sex. The silence may be very uncomfortable; but give them plenty of time to say something. If it bombs the first time, don't give up, try again in a day or two. You may need another headline so scan the paper or listen to the news. It is full of sex education topics.

3. Use that TV. It's been using you long enough! There is more sex education on the television screen than anywhere else in our society. Children spend more time in front of the television set than in school or in a meaningful relationship with their parents. By the time a person graduates from high school they have watched 15,000 hours of television, as compared to 11,000 hours in the classroom and 3,165 to 6,205 hours in talking to you. As a family you might try some of the following ways to use the TV as a sex education tool:



Pick a show and a particular character for that evening and pay close attention to what's happening. Take turns calling out issues and messages. Example: J.R. Ewing in Dallas. Is this the kind of a husband, father or brother you would want? Why? Why not? It's always easier to discuss a soap opera star's problems than your own. So use the "soaps" to stimulate discussion on consequences of sexual activity. Use any one of the many family shows that have appeared on TV in the last couple of seasons to discuss everyday family situations.

Pick an issue and explore how it is dealt with on TV; for example, body image. How do commercials affect your views of your physical self?

DISCUSSING VALUES IS IMPORTANT

You and your adolescents have a special relationship. Information and attitudes from you can be especially meaningful and more likely to be integrated into an adolescent's character than education from other sources. Therefore, sex education is one of your major concerns. It is probably one area that you have had the least amount of preparation. We hope this newsletter series has helped you become better prepared to be the primary sex educator in your adolescent's life. Remember, knowledge, skills, a positive attitude, and a clear set of values are the tools that you need to continue this most important task of parenthood.

When you allow yourself to be more open about sex and sexuality you become a positive role model (see letter II) for your adolescents. You help them develop a "sense of power" (knowledge is power), and you give them an opportunity to connect to you, helping them develop an unusual advantage, being one of the few who can talk to his/her parents about sex and sexuality. Remember, these characteristics help develop high self-esteem (see letter II).

Letting your adolescents know your values is important. If you believe that it's wrong to bring an unwanted child into the world or that no one has a right to take sexual advantage of another, tell your adolescent. As a parent you have a right to express those opinions. But even if you live the values you teach, your adolescents may think about and possibly try other values before they decide what their own values will be. Be patient and keep listening to and talking with your adolescent, for most children grow up to be like their parents.

LET'S SUMMARIZE:

Peers are usually the major source of the adolescent's sex information.

Sex education can delay sexual activity by opening communication between parents and kids.

There are many ways you can prepare yourself to talk about sexuality. Know the facts, know yourself, listen and realize that adolescents are interested in talking about sexuality.

Adolescents do not know all there is to know about sex, and neither do their parents.

Sex education begins at birth.

Last year 26,000 teens 15 and younger became pregnant; 11,000 had babies.

Answer your child's questions honestly and simply.

Don't assume your child knows the answers.

Sex and love, though compatible, are not the same.

TV is a good discussion starter for sexuality issues.

By age 10, your adolescent thinks he or she has all the answers or has learned NOT to ask.

Practice listening to your adolescent in a less emotional area before trying to listen to what they have to say about sex and sexuality.

ADD TO YOUR CONTRACT

Name two things you are going to do to open communication between you and your adolescent on the subject of sex and sexuality.

1.

2.

List two things you are going to stop doing which, if continued, will stop communication between you and your adolescent.

1.

2.

SUGGESTED READING:

Books recommended for parents and families:

Raising a Child Conservatively in Sexuality Permissive World, Sol Gordon and Judith Gordon, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1983.

Sex on TV — A Guide for Parents by David Lloyd Green, Network Publications, 1700 Mission Street, Suite 203, PO Box 8506, Santa Cruz, CA 95061, Cost $1.95.

Books recommended for adolescents: (Read before giving to your adolescent.)

Teenage Survival Book, Sol Gordon, Times Book, New York Times Book Co., 130 Fifth Ave., NY, 10011, 1981.

Dear Diary and **Am I Normal,** paperbacks by Jeanne Betancourt, Avon Books, NY, NY, 1983.

The Facts of Love, Living, Loving and Growing Up by Alex and Jane Comfort, Balantine Books, NY, 1979.

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